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INFO RUEHNE/AMEMBASSY NEW DELHI PRIORITY 9382
RUEHKA/AMEMBASSY DHAKA PRIORITY 9015
RUEHKT/AMEMBASSY KATHMANDU PRIORITY 3940
RUEHLO/AMEMBASSY LONDON PRIORITY 2885
RUEHIL/AMEMBASSY ISLAMABAD PRIORITY 5904
RUEHBI/AMCONSUL MUMBAI PRIORITY 4389
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI PRIORITY 6448
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 03 COLOMBO 000400

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STATE FOR SCA/INS
PACOM FOR FPA

E.O. 12958: DECL: 03/13/2016

TAGS: [PGOV](#) [CE](#)

SUBJECT: READY OR NOT, HERE THEY COME: (MOST) LOCAL
ELECTIONS STILL SCHEDULED FOR MARCH 30

REF: A. COLOMBO 196

[1](#)B. COLOMBO 382

Classified By: AMB. JEFFREY J. LUNSTEAD. REASON: 1.4 (B,D).

SUMMARY

[1](#)1. (C) Local government elections, scheduled to take place in most areas on March 30, have been embroiled in controversy and legal challenges since the deadline for nominations passed on February 16. Although the pro-Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has filed nominations, the party, citing concerns that electoral violence could undermine the peace process, has asked the Election Commission to postpone elections in the north and east. Neither of the two largest parties--President Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) and the opposition United National Party (UNP)--has yet shown signs of campaigning in earnest, leaving the field clear to the hardline--and even harder-working--Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP). If the JVP makes significant inroads against either the SLFP or UNP, especially in their traditional strongholds, the Sinhalese nationalist party can be expected to up the volume on its criticism of government policies, including the peace process. End summary.

CONFUSION, CONTROVERSY, COURT CASES
DOG PLANS FOR LOCAL GOVERNMENT ELECTIONS

[1](#)2. (SBU) Planning for local government elections in 330 localities islandwide has been plagued by controversy and legal challenges ever since the February 16 deadline for filing nominations. Most of the court cases were filed in response to the rejection by Election Commission officials of some nomination lists in various localities for various reasons, with the most sensational being the disapproval of the United National Party (UNP) slate for Colombo and President Rajapaksa's Sri Lanka Freedom Party (SLFP) list in its traditional stronghold in the western district of Gampaha. (Note: In fact, just about every national-level party had at least one list rejected--with the notable

exception of the Janatha Vimukthi Peramuna (JVP), which is fielding candidates in 22 districts. End note.) In addition, a separate case filed just before the deadline by a Sri Lanka Muslim Congress (SLMC) malcontent challenging the authority of SLMC leader Rauff Hakeem and General Secretary Hassan Ali forced the Election Commission to delay approval of all nominations submitted by that party. While some of the cases challenging these rejections have already been heard--and in many instances, including the UNP's Colombo case, the Election Commission's decisions overridden--substantial confusion persists. In all, the Election Commissioner faces 33 court cases--representing 10 percent of the localities nationwide. The courts have already issued rulings delaying elections in 16 different localities, including Colombo.

SLFP, UNP LATE OUT OF THE STARTING GATE;
JVP OUT IN FORCE

13. (SBU) The two biggest parties, the SLFP and UNP, perhaps distracted by their respective court cases and preoccupied by other issues (the SLFP by talks with the LTTE and the UNP by internal dissension), have not yet begun large-scale campaigning in earnest. Unlike the JVP (Ref A), neither party to date has mounted large rallies at the district level. UNP MP Jayalath Jayawardana told poloff on March 13 that so far his party has confined its campaign to door-to-door canvassing and "one-on-one" meetings with voters. On March 15 the local press reported that the UNP would officially "kick off" its campaign on March 18 (after embattled UNP leader Ranil Wickremesinghe returns from a visit to Norway)--leaving only 10 days of electioneering

COLOMBO 00000400 002 OF 003

before a pre-poll moratorium on campaigning on March 28. SLFP Administrative Director Dr. Cecil Bandara Senaratne told poloff on March 15 of similar plans, reporting that his party's district-level and provincial meetings would start from March 18, with no major meetings planned yet for Colombo. So far, Senaratne acknowledged, SLFP campaigning has been limited to house-to-house canvassing. He blamed the late start on the extensive litigation the party has been immersed in since eight of its nomination lists were rejected on February 16.

14. (C) The SLFP faces "a tough fight in some places," Senaratne admitted, primarily because of JVP challenges in the south. He listed Matara, Galle, and the President's home base of Hambantota as areas of particular concern. In addition, some electorates in the north-central district of Anuradhapura, where some prospective SLFP candidates have crossed over to the JVP, may also be problematic for the ruling party, he noted. The SLFP may even "lose a few" in its traditional stronghold of Gampaha, he said, because of JVP competition for essentially the same voter base. The party anticipates "a big fight" with the UNP for the municipal councils of Colombo and the Colombo suburb of Kotte.

15. (C) In a March 6 meeting, SLMC MP S. Nijamudeen and SLMC Provincial Council Member Shafeek Rajabdeen told poloff that they suspected Minister of Infrastructure Development and Fisheries Housing A.L.M. Athuallah of engineering the court challenge--strategically filed just 15 minutes before nominations closed on February 16--to the SLMC leadership that succeeded in holding up the entire slate of SLMC nominees islandwide. As evidence, they cited the fact that the plaintiff's address was the same as that of Athuallah, a former SLMC member who broke away to join the Government coalition. "We definitely feel the government has a hand in the judiciary," Rajabdeen continued, charging that the case was fabricated as a nuisance to prevent the SLMC from contesting in the east, where President Rajapaksa fared relatively poorly in the November presidential elections. Rajabdeen went on to accuse the Government of Sri Lanka (GSL)

of trying to fragment the Muslim community and asked that the USG request the GSL "not to interfere in the democratic process." (Note: In a March 9 decision, the courts threw out the injunction against the SLMC and ruled that polls be delayed in 12 electorates, primarily in the east, contested by the SLMC.)

TNA ASKS FOR POSTPONEMENT

¶6. (SBU) Although the pro-LTTE Tamil National Alliance (TNA) has filed nomination papers in selected electorates in the north and east, including in LTTE-controlled territories, the party has asked the Election Commission to postpone polls in those areas until after the second round of talks between the GSL and the Tigers, scheduled to begin April 19 in Geneva, TNA MP Suresh Premachandran told poloff on March 7. Premachandran, noting that a certain level of violence habitually accompanies local elections anyway, said that the TNA was seeking the postponement as a precautionary measure to ensure that nothing jeopardizes prospects for the upcoming meeting.

COMMENT

¶7. (C) The comparatively lackadaisical attitude toward the upcoming local elections displayed so far by the SLFP and UNP could mean one of two things. Either both parties are expecting the polls to be postponed and are conserving their resources accordingly or they are so preoccupied with other external (for the SLFP, talks with the LTTE) and internal (for the UNP, repeated challenges to the party leadership) matters to get their respective acts together. Whatever the reason, so far both parties' inattention has left the field clear for the JVP to get out there and do what it does best--connect with voters, especially via rabble-rousing mass

COLOMBO 00000400 003 OF 003

rallies, at the local level. The JVP has made consistent gains in local polls over the last ten years, and clearly views this election as an opportunity to expand its already impressive grassroots network and improve its national visibility. Even if polls end up being postponed, the SLFP and UNP may nonetheless find themselves having to play catch up, even in areas they have long considered "safe," with the better organized and harder-working JVP. While the JVP so far has been relatively restrained in its criticism of President Mahinda Rajapaksa, we expect that may change--especially with regard to his handling of the peace process--if the JVP scores significant successes against the SLFP in these elections.

LUNSTEAD